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# The Ruffed Grouse

## PENNSYLVANIA'S STATE BIRD

*Publishing paid for with Game Commission funds*

By NED SMITH



*Photo by Leonard Lee Rue*

**P**ERHAPS I'm a trifle biased, but I can't think of a more enjoyable combination than a sunny November afternoon, a nicely balanced scatter-gun, and a vine-draped thicket full of grouse. The whirlwind explosion of flushing birds and the thrill of making (or miffing) a difficult shot has no equal in small game hunting.

Of Pennsylvania's six resident game birds, the ruffed grouse is the most difficult to hunt, the most mysterious in its habits, and the most thrilling in its behavior. For decades men with gun in hand, heart in the autumnal highlands, and the swish of fall leaves in their faces have sought "old ruff," king of the game birds. That the

grouse's status among birds is well recognized is best attested to by Act No. 234 of the General Assembly of Pennsylvania, approved June 22, 1931, naming the ruffed grouse as the official state bird of the Commonwealth.

The ruffed grouse was not always the cagey game bird he is today. Pennsylvania's first white men found it easy to kill plenty of birds with well-aimed sticks and stones. Even today, in the wilder portions of Canada, the ruffed grouse is equally unsophisticated, and hunters easily kill their limits by blasting the poor birds on the ground.

Number 7½'s can be very educational, though, and as every grouse hunter knows, the modern-day Pennsylvania grouse is the slickest thing in feathers. Its phenomenal eyesight and exasperating shyness make it a difficult creature to hunt, and only the smartest of bird dogs can make the "brown bomber" lie to the point. When it does stay put its roaring take-off, frequently occurring after the hunter has passed its hiding place, is apt to completely shatter the nerves of all but the most seasoned gunners. Add to this the well-known fact that the bird's escape route invariably places several hulking tree trunks between the fading bird and the frantic human, and it's small wonder there are so few grouse hunters.

For all his exasperating characteristics the "king of game birds" is nevertheless enthusiastically admired by sportsmen with an eye for beauty. His cocky crest, magnificent tail, and haughty bearing make him a singularly handsome creature. Most specimens from Pennsylvania are predominantly brown above, with a sprinkling of whitish markings and black mottling.



GROUSE HEN  
INCUBATING

The tail is generally brown, tipped with gray, and crossed with a wide black sub-terminal band and narrower black cross-bars. Ruffs of glossy black feathers particularly encircle the neck. Variations of the usual color phase include "silver-tails"—in which the tails are gray instead of brown, and "red-ruffs"—a rusty plumage with chocolate brown ruffs and a dark brown tail band. Female grouse are colored much like the males. The chief external differences are the female's smaller ruffs, shorter tail, and interrupted barring of the lower neck and upper breast. Also, the black tail band is generally unbroken in the male and broken in the center in the female.

The ruffed grouse is a sturdy, compact bird, admirably adapted to life in a hostile environment. Its plumage offers the ultimate in protective coloration. Its stout wings, powered by tremendous breast muscles, are perfectly designed for taking off at full throttle and maneuvering swiftly through thick underbrush. Its strongly nailed feet are excellent for scratching among the fallen leaves for food. In winter they are transformed into veritable snowshoes by the growth of a horny fringe on the toes. The grouse's winter plumage is unbelievably dense, providing excellent insulation against the cold—in fact, in frigid weather these birds think nothing of flying headlong into a snowdrift to spend the night.

The ruffed grouse can never be accused of being a gadabout. It might travel no farther than a half mile from a given point during the entire year, and its daily movements usually cover but a few hundred yards. For this reason its small home range must meet all its requirements as to food, cover, nesting sites, and a certain amount of seclusion.

Food is not much of a problem, for the grouse is perhaps our most omnivorous game bird. Its summer diet consists chiefly of insects, berries and other wild fruit, sedges and green leaves. As autumn approaches fewer insects are utilized and their place is taken by wild grapes and late-maturing fruit and berries, mast, and various buds. Later in the fall and winter buds make up a large part of the diet.

The study of crop contents is an interesting hobby, one from which the hunter can learn a great deal. You never know what you'll find. One mysteriously light and fluffy crop I once opened was stuffed with nothing but witch hazel blossoms. Another was filled to the bursting point with bright red barberry fruits. Some contain acorns so large you can't imagine how the bird could swallow them. But the most interesting are those containing a typical collection of grouse foods. One crop might contain five or six different kinds of leaves and as many different buds, plus a few acorns or berries. Among the leaves I've found in grouse crops were those of arbutus, sheep sorrel, wintergreen, greenbriers, rattlesnake weed, everlasting, hepatica, wood sorrel, and various sedges. Berries and fruits included wild grapes, wild apples, hawthorn, greenbrier, barberry, wintergreen, chokeberry, and various dogwoods and viburnums. Mast included beechnuts, chestnuts, and acorns. Buds from birches, aspens, cherries, blueberries, arbutus, apple, and other trees and shrubs were heavily utilized in late fall and winter.

Of all the factors that influence a



WONDER IF SHE'S  
GETTING THE MESSAGE?



— NOTHING LIKE A BUNCH  
OF GRAPES FOR A  
NIGHTCAP.

WELL, WHAT DO YOU KNOW —  
A "TEABERRY" THAT DIDN'T  
GET EATEN!



WATCH IT, KIDS—  
SOMETHING MOVED OVER THERE!



THAT'S CLOSE  
ENOUGH, MISTER!

WHO'S THIS GUY  
ROCK HUDSON?



NED  
SMITH

grouse's survival, none is as important as cover. This has been clearly demonstrated by the decline of northern Pennsylvania's grouse population within the past three decades, as our out-sized deer herd and rapidly maturing forests combined to eliminate valuable undergrowth. Today good grouse cover is returning on a limited scale wherever sizable tracts of timber are being cut, but most of Pennsylvania's northern counties are still too open to shelter many of these secretive birds.

A seasoned grouse hunter can recognize good cover on sight. Laurel and greenbrier thickets along stream bottoms are excellent, especially when studded with hemlocks or white pines. Patches of windfalls, the edges festooned with wild grape vines, are likely spots. Dense pine woods among immature hardwoods usually harbor some birds, and trails and roads through scrub oak country are excellent. Abandoned apple orchards close to cover can be mighty good, especially late in the season, and slashings a few years old, when overgrown with suitable vines and underbrush, generally attract birds from the surrounding woodlands.

But this is hunting season talk. To really get to know the ruffed grouse you should visit his haunts in early spring when *his* year is just beginning. Here, in the first sunny days of mid-March you can hear his throbbing love song—a series of hollow, muffled thumps that start slowly, accelerate steadily, and end in a rolling whirl. The sound is produced by the cock bird as he stands on a log, firmly braced by his fanned-out tail, and beats the air sharply with his wings.

The drumming log is usually an old one of considerable size and generally somewhat mossy and decayed. Some logs have been used by generation after generation of drummers and these venerable specimens invariably have a low spot where countless performances have worn away several inches of crumbling wood. Because

the bird commonly roosts on the drumming log during the mating season such logs can readily be recognized by the heaps of droppings. Where suitable logs are scarce rocks, stumps, and exposed tree roots serve the same purpose. Although spring is the mating season, grouse can occasionally be heard drumming at different times of the year, particularly during the warm days of autumn. Darkness doesn't always ring down the curtain, either. Several years ago while awaiting the return of a deer hunting companion several of us heard a grouse drumming nearby, even though the sun had set hours before and a bright full moon glimmered above the tree tops.

The earliest springtime performances attract males as well as females, and when that happens a rousing good fight often ensues. To the victor goes the territory, including the drumming log and any footloose females that might be available. As the drumming season hits full stride during the month of April most of the females in the vicinity are in turn lured to the drumming log. Each is greeted by the irresistible spectacle of the cock in full strut. His handsome tail is spread like an opened fan and iridescent black ruffs form a puffy frill about his head. He steps primly back and forth on the log, dragging his pinions at his side. As the female comes closer he bounces off the log to meet her, hissing and shaking his head in time with his slow-motion strutting, until the comely lady-grouse forgets she is a lady.

The drummer himself has no more interest in the matter, but the hen's problems are just beginning. Her first task is to select a nesting site, usually at the base of a tree or bush. Here she scratches a depression in the ground, lines it with dry leaves, and over a period of several weeks deposits her six to sixteen white or buff eggs therein.

As with other ground-nesting birds, the eggs are vulnerable to every skunk,

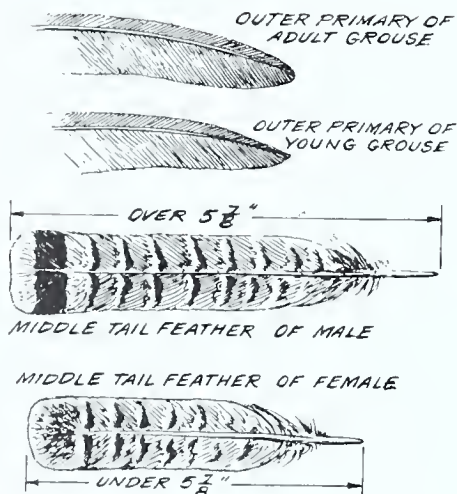




*Photos by Hal H. Harrison*

**Life History of the Ruffed Grouse**





'possum, raccoon, blacksnake, and crow that comes along. Raccoons, foxes, wildcats, and great horned owls are at all times a threat to the setting bird as well.

If all goes well, the chicks emerge approximately twenty-three days after incubation begins. Getting out of the shell is an exhausting struggle but in a few hours the fuzzy little creatures are scampering about like little mice. They usually leave the nest the same day they are hatched.

From the beginning the young are taught to squat motionless on the ground at a signal from the mother, and to see a flock of a dozen or more tiny chicks suddenly disappear before your very eyes is to witness one of Nature's most incredible feats of magic. So concealed, the young are exasperatingly difficult to find, and they will rarely stir unless actually touched. Meanwhile, the frantic mother bird either attempts to lure you from the vicinity by a pathetic broken-wing act, or rushes right at you, squealing in rage.

Little grouse must pull off the hiding trick to perfection, for death is the penalty for a shoddy performance. Their enemies are legion. Cooper's and sharpshinned hawks, mink, weasels, 'coons, foxes, and snakes all take their toll. Heavy or prolonged rains, too, can be fatal to the tender chicks.

In a few days little brown flight feathers are appearing on their downy wing tips and at the age of three weeks the young can fly quite well. At one month of age they can burst from the ground like scared quail when flushed, and by early fall can scarcely be distinguished from their mother.

In October the young birds undergo a strange period of restlessness. Mounting antagonism and nervousness finally reach a climax in the phenomenon known as the fall shuffle, or "crazy flight," during which individuals suddenly take off in seemingly undirected flight. Many such spontaneous excursions come to an abrupt end against a tree, building, or picture window. Whatever the reason for the fall shuffle, it has the effect of scattering the brood and severing the apron strings. From now on the young are completely independent of the mother bird, and by the time hunting season rolls around they have reached adulthood.

They are fewer in number, now. Possibly only two or three out of the original dozen have survived the hazards of growing up in Penn's Woods. But be on your toes, hunters! These birds may be young but they have learned their lessons well.

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*Much of the Love of Hunting Comes  
From Sharing It With a Good Dog.*

## Grouse and Grouse Dogs

By Herbert Kendrick

**P**ENNSYLVANIA'S 1960 grouse season was very successful for the hunters who were properly prepared and spent enough time in the woods to locate productive covers. Post season reports indicate a considerable rise in the number of grouse flushed per gun hour. It is encouraging, but odd, that our grouse population increased, while Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia and Michigan reported a definite decline.

While hunting grouse from Canada to Carolina, it is amazing to find such a small group who seriously hunt this fine game bird, and still more bewildering to see men hunt without a dog. Perhaps the major reasons for hunting without a dog include: experience

with worthless dogs, difficulties involved in purchasing trained dogs, expense, lengthy uncertain process of training one's own, and a lack of understanding of the tremendous assets of good grouse dogs.

Training the grouse dog is often a very rewarding experience, and is considered by many as a great sport. Hunting grouse behind one's own trained dog is a necessary adjunct to the fine art of grouse gunning, for much of the love of hunting would be lost without sharing the fun with a fine dog. Retrieving alone makes the dog well worth the time, effort and expense of training.

The superlative grouse specialist is an animal of pride and joy, and is indeed rare, for he is sublimely endowed with a hypnotic, mysterious, instinctive ability, combined with the qualifications of natural talent, thorough training, and extensive experience. The truly great grouse dog can be correctly placed, without hesitation,





at the peak of gun dog development, just as the grouse commands first place in the hearts of game bird gunners everywhere.

Woodcock, quail, and pheasants may well deserve the respect of a seasoned grouse hunter, but the ruffed grouse is by far the most difficult for a dog to handle. He is the most crafty of all our game birds, and his intelligence accounts for his survival in the rough woodlands, and intensifies the interest in hunting him. In cover the grouse is extremely alert, appearing to know when and where the dog and gunner near his hiding place. The old drummer quickly formulates careful plans for escape before the dog is within scenting range. He may sneak out to the edge of the woods, silently glide away, flush wild, or sit tight. Time and again, with his bag of tricks, he succeeds in bewildering the dog and the hunter but a well experienced dog will greatly enhance the hunter's chances for a shot.

The grouse possesses the ability to startle the gunner with his bold flush. Being a native trickster, there seems to be no limit to his strategies of masterly retreats. It requires a dog of good blood lines, proper training, and considerable experience in the woods to successfully handle grouse.



**FUTURE GROUSE HUNTER**, this seven-week-old English setter has yet to thrill to the booming flush and rushing feathers of that great Pennsylvania game bird. He will some day make his master very proud when he points his limit of ruffed grouse.

The most beautiful and exciting performances of grouse dogs are the bold, fast and snappy workers capable of bearing down surely and swiftly on a bird, pointing and holding staunchly, but usually these class dogs are products of careful breeding and professional training, very difficult and expensive for the average hunter to obtain. The field trial men have developed some rare dogs, and deserve much credit for improving the breeds; however, the joys of hunting with a dog are not restricted to any group. Dogs lacking in color and style, often make up the difference with intelligence, bird sense, and love of hunting for his master.

The dog with less speed, range, and handling ability can be within our grasp, and even if he cannot compete in the trials, he will do well as a gun dog when taught to locate his game, hold it well, and retrieve correctly.

Pointers and setters continue to lead the field as grouse dogs, although the Brittany spaniel is gaining in popularity. These small dogs work well for grouse hunting. Irish and Gordon setters are staging a welcome return to the grouse woods as excellent performers.

The aristocratic ruffed grouse seems to absorb a part of the rugged nature of the forests he makes his home. You cannot expect a grouse to be anything but tough to bag, for he lives with steep hills, rocks, ravines covered with decaying logs, and hidden by fern, hemlock and alders. He may dwell on the hardwood ridges where leaves are colorful, woodlands damp, and pungent odors perfume the cool air. You climb the mountainside and as you stop to rest, the dog points in the berry vines. The bird roars out and when the gun cracks, a little puff of feathers, and then the deep thump so familiar to the sentimental grouse man. The fellow who is successful with this type of gunning, and shares it with a good grouse dog, is well aware he is smiled upon by the gods.